



## Gambia, The

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 4,361 square miles, and its population is approximately 1,365,000. Sunni Muslims constitute more than 95 percent of the population. The vast majority are Maliki Sufis, of which the main orders represented are Tijaniyah, Qadiriyyah, Muridiyyah, and Ahmadiyah. Except for the Ahmadiyah, all Sufi orders pray together at common mosques. A small percentage of Muslims, predominantly immigrants from South Asia, do not ascribe to any traditional Islamic school of thought.

An estimated 4 percent of the population practices Christianity and less than 1 percent practices indigenous animist religions. The Christian community, situated mostly in the west and south of the country, is predominantly Roman Catholic; there are also several Protestant denominations including Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and various small Protestant evangelical denominations. There is a small group of followers of the Baha'i Faith and no significant Jewish population.

Intermarriage between Muslims and Christians is common. In some areas, Islam and Christianity have been syncretized with animism. There are few atheists in the country.

Foreign missionary groups, representing mostly small denominations from Nigeria and Sierra Leone, operate in the country.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. There is no state religion.

The Constitution establishes Cadi Courts in such places as the Chief Justice determines. The two Cadi Courts in the country sit in Banjul and Kanifing. Their jurisdiction applies only to matters of marriage, divorce, and inheritance that involve Muslims. The Cadi Courts apply classical Maliki fiqh (Islamic law).

The Government considers the following religious holidays as national holidays: Tobaski (Eid al-Adha), Yaumul Ashora, the Prophet Muhammed's birthday, Koriteh (Eid al-Fitr), Good Friday, Easter Monday, Assumption Day, and Christmas Day. Religious holidays do not affect negatively any religious group.

The Government does not require religious groups to register. Religiously based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are subject to the same registration and licensing requirements as other NGOs.

The Government permits and does not limit religious instruction in schools. Biblical and Qur'anic studies are provided in both public and private schools throughout the country without government restriction or interference. Religious instruction in public schools is provided at government expense but is not mandatory.

### **Restrictions on Religious Freedom**

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

In several interviews, Catholic and Anglican bishops have praised the Government and people of the country for the friendly protection and accommodation of the Christian minority. The Gambian Christian Council, an organization consisting of clerical leaders of the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist churches, discusses matters of importance to Christians in the country.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

### **Forced Religious Conversion**

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Abuses by Terrorist Organizations**

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Inter-marriage between members of different religious groups is legal and socially acceptable.

The Inter-Faith Group for Dialogue and Peace (IGDP), comprising representatives of the Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i communities, meets regularly to discuss matters of mutual concern.

Practitioners of female genital mutilation (FGM) in the country firmly believe that Islam mandates the practice and its surrounding rites. In May, the head of the Supreme Islamic Council stated that the practice is an "honor for women to undergo," but other, well-respected local Muslim leaders continued to speak out against it, as did human rights activists and others. Although government programs to promote girls' education and development quietly work to reduce the prevalence of FGM by changing societal attitudes, the Government's official stance is that female circumcision is a cultural issue that the Government cannot forbid. However, on June 22 the National Assembly passed the Children's Bill, aimed at curbing violence against children, that outlaws "social and cultural practices that affect the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child and in particular, those customs and practices that are (1) prejudicial to the health and life of the child and; (2) discriminatory to the child on the grounds of sex or other status."

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In particular, the U.S. Embassy promoted interfaith dialogue by sending religious leaders to the United States on International Visitor Programs. One participant, a Shari'a judge, took part in a tour that focused on religious diversity in the U.S.

In May 2005, the Embassy and the IGDP jointly sponsored a panel discussion based on a paper written and presented by an Embassy representative entitled, "Judaism and the Dignity of the Human Person in the Process of Inter-Faith Dialogue." Clerics from the Muslim, Christian, and Baha'i faiths participated in the discussion, which was later broadcast twice on national television.

In November 2004, the U.S. Ambassador hosted an Iftar for more than 50 Muslim leaders and some church clerics. The Ambassador hosted a similar event for the country's political leadership.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51474.htm)